Examining Classroom Talk

Rajni Kumar

Introduction

All of us growing up in traditional schools have undergone "an apprentice of observation" (Lortie, 1975) lasting many years. We are so inured to the patterns of classroom talk that we consider them "normal" and they have become invisible to us. Fortunately for us, there is research that serves to 'unpack' conventional classroom talk, and that focuses on the characteristics of dialogic talk that promotes student learning. In this article, I will highlight the key features of this research in order to help teachers examine their own practice.

Characteristics of Talk in Conventional Classrooms

In most classrooms, talk is monologic, as teachers stand and deliver information while students are mostly passive. Goodlad's study of more than a thousand classrooms found that "teachers at all levels apparently did not know how to vary their instructional procedures, did not want to, or had some kind of difficulty doing so" (Goodlad, 1984, p. 105). More recently, Lefstein and Snell posited, "Teachers dominate classroom interaction, talking most of the time, controlling topics and allocation of turns, judging the acceptability of pupil contributions and policing inappropriate behaviour" (Lefstein & Snell, 2011, p. 167). Goodlad's study also revealed that predominantly the emotional tone of classrooms was flat. Joy, anger and enthusiasm were kept under control (Goodlad, 1984, p. 124) Most classroom talk is structured as Initiation, Response and Evaluation (IRE) cycles. Teachers initiate topics, asking mostly closed-ended questions of previously transmitted information, students answer, and the teacher evaluates their answers as right or wrong. Holt describes how this sets up a competitive dynamic, where students vie for the teacher's attention and approval, and try to avoid the embarrassment of being wrong. In such a scenario, the work itself loses intrinsic meaning for the children (Holt, 1964).

Most teacher talk is characterized by certainty and closure. Feldman as quoted in Bruner found that teachers used modal auxiliaries (like "might", "could", etc.) more when talking with colleagues than with students (Bruner, 1986, p. 126). Teacher talk in class rarely reflected uncertainty, an invitation to further thought, or a sense of the hypothetical nature of knowledge. The world that the teachers were presenting to their students "was a far more settled, far less hypothetical, far less negotiatory world than the one they were offering to their colleagues" (Bruner, 1986, p. 126).

Alexander describes classroom talk in English primary classrooms as having the following characteristics:

> Interactions were brief. Teachers moved rapidly from child to child, from close-ended question to question, to maximise participation. Children focussed on providing or identifying correct answers. Teachers ended the IRE exchange with praise or correction. They glossed over wrong answers instead of using

them to further the children's thinking. There was little speculative talk, thinking aloud, or attempts to develop sustained arguments. Teachers' questions were on content, but the children's were mainly about procedures. The questions tested recall, and were rarely authentic. Children were given only enough time to recall but not to think (Alexander, 2008, p. 99).

Alexander finds this to be the predominant pattern of classroom talk in the US and UK but not necessarily in all countries, and contrasts it with the more sustained conversation found in Russian and French classrooms (Alexander, 2008, pp. 100-101).

In a study of secondary classrooms in the 1960s, Barnes found technical language being widely employed without adequate bridges to help students make sense of it. He states:

> Some fluent children ... adopt the jargon and parrot whole stretches of lingo. Personal intellectual struggle is made irrelevant and personal view is never asked for. Language and experience are torn asunder. Worse still, many children find impersonal language mere noise (Barnes, 1969, p. 12).

Nell Keddie wrote about how the more "successful" students, largely of middle class origin, accepted the school's framing of questions and problems and did not confuse it with problem-solving in real life. However, children from working class families were often stumped by the teacher's criteria and categories as they could not reconcile them with their everyday knowledge. (Keddie, 1971). This was also expressed in the Yash Pal committee report where the "burden of non-comprehension" was found to be "more pernicious" than the "gravitational burden of the school bag." (GOI, 1993, p. iv)

Kumar (1988) found that in the "textbook culture" of Indian classrooms not only content and as-sessment, but also classroom talk derives from the textbook. "Once the right answer was established [from the textbook], it then functioned as the only acceptable answer. Even the word order could not be changed." (Sarangapani, 2003, p. 114). The "teachering" voice was "slow and deliberate-in the mode of making announcements," giving everything the teacher said the stamp of "ought-to-know" knowledge (Sarangapani, 2003, p. 132). What teachers said counted because they had the knowledge to "crack the exam," and to secure the future. Those who answered correctly rose in status, however absurd and meaningless the question.

Characteristics of Dialogic Talk that Promotes Learning

Different studies show that dialogic classroom talk not only promotes student learning but also improves the participation and performance of less able children1. (Nystrand, 1997; Alexander, 2008, pp. 108-109). The characteristics of such talk include:

Shared control: Dialogic talk implies shared control between the teacher and the children over the direction of the talk. The students ask genuine questions and the teacher allows them to modify the topic under discussion. The main aim of monological talk, however, is transmission of knowledge and it shows a high degree of teacher control.

Social constructivist talk: Vygotsky described how observation of, and participation in social talk by children becomes internalized over time as "thinking". Language constructs our picture of the world, and is a key tool through which children make sense of the world and their experiences (Vygotsky, 1962).

Barnes proposed that classroom talk must connect to children's experience of the world,

requiring that children be exposed to concrete experiences, not just talk (Barnes, 2008, p. 4). There must be space for "exploratory talk", through which children explore ideas, possibilities and understandings. Such talk is hesitant and broken, and has frequent changes in direction. Children bring to mind new and old ideas, and information and experiences from different sources, examine them from different angles and find connections. They look for examples and counter-examples, and formulate rules and find exceptions. Barnes contrasts this kind of talk with "presentational talk", a more considered, rehearsed, polished talk meant to demonstrate understanding rather than discover it.

Cumulative talk: An important characteristic of cumulative talk is that "contributions refer to and build upon what has gone before (by agreeing, disagreeing, adding, qualifying, etc.), thus enabling an advance in the collective understanding of the topic in question" (Skidmore, 2006, p. 506). Teachers have the most difficulty with cumulative talk, because they have to build bridges from individual student understandings to established disciplinary understandings of the topic in a way that is integrative (Alexander, 2008, p. 111). Far too often, disciplinary understanding sits as an inert memorized layer on top of students' unexamined naive understanding of a concept.

Wells proposes that the IRE sequence can be used in a situation where the teacher asks a question which requires the student to deploy a higher order thinking skill (e.g. clarify, justify, exemplify, explain or expand) rather than only recall. The teacher's evaluation too could build on the student's response, in similarly complex ways (Skidmore, 2006, p. 507).

Authentic talk: Nystrand's study on authentic talk found that dialogical instruction included the use of authentic questions by the teachers (i.e., there is no pre-determined answer the teacher has in mind). This seems crucial in creating a real community of learners.

Meta-cognitive talk: People's concept of learning often draws from quiz shows, master mind, spelling tests and other instances of rote learning and "getting the right answer" (Barnes, 2008, p. 8). Learning is understood as copying down what is written on the blackboard and memorizing the wordings of scientific principles instead of trying to understand them (Alexander, 2008, p. 111).

Researchers emphasize the need for meta-cognitive talk in the classroom. This involves questioning: What is learning, or thinking? How is a discussion useful? How can we know if what we are reading is true? What are the criteria by which we can say that something is a good answer? What have I understood and what is not clear to me? What have I learnt and how do I know that I have learnt it? Why should I know this, why is it important? Discussions on these types of questions are very important in building classrooms where learning rather than recall happens.

Talk that creates a safe atmosphere: All researchers emphasize the need for a respectful and safe atmosphere. How the teacher "validates-or indeed fails to validate-that pupil's attempt to join in the thinking" is crucial to whether children use talk to think and learn (Barnes, 2008, p. 8). In dialogic classrooms, turns are managed more by shared routines rather than through competitive bidding, i.e. teachers and students together devise the ground rules for management of discussion and keeping order (Alexander, 2003, p. 37).

According to Barnes (2008) questions that are likely to encourage dialogic learning oriented talk include (p. 10):

If that is the case, how come so and so happens?

I don't get that. What do you mean by -A-?

Is -X- an example of what you are saying?

If you changed -Y-(one of the elements in the statement or situation) would you get the same result?

Is it like -Z-(i.e. suggesting an analogy)?

Therefore, students must be involved in both producing and evaluating evidence to support arguments. Teachers on their part must give the children materials (maps, pictures, texts, science equipment) that form the basis for discussion.

Reasons why Conventional Classroom Talk is Resistant to Change

Monologic forms of talk are extremely resistant to change. Why is this?

Structural factors: Secondary school teachers encountering larger numbers of students have fewer opportunities to probe the thinking and learning styles of each child, than primary teachers who have more hours with fewer children. The combination of large class size and extensive testing pushes teachers towards "teaching to test", aiding retention and reproduction rather than exploration and understanding (Skidmore, 2006, p. 511).

Socio-cultural milieu: Alexander found that in central European countries where the notion of the collective is strong, teachers focus on joint understanding of the class. They tend to nominate turns and encourage children to think aloud. In the UK and US, where individual achievement is highly valued, teachers encourage bidding for turns and speed, and correctness of student response is emphasized.

The teacher's philosophical stance: Enumerating strategies and characteristics of dialogical talk may not be sufficient to bring about change. Talk arises from stances and values internalized by teachers, which needs examination. Here are some axes for reflection:

Do teachers recognize the incredible drive and ability of children to learn and make sense of the world, and not view them as "empty vessels" to be filled? It matters "how far students are treated as active epistemic agents, i.e. participants in the production of their own knowledge" (Skidmore, 2006, p. 505).

Knowledge is often viewed "as an assemblage of isolated facts memorized in more or less the same verbal form in which they were learned ..." (Dearden, 1968, p. 61). Much of school knowledge is taught as a collection of facts and skills without much reference to the structure of the underlying disciplines. However, each discipline has its own set of interconnected concepts, and "validation procedures for determining the truth, rightness or adequacy of various ideas entertained" (Dearden, 1968, p. 63). Also, knowledge is always provisional, there are scope and limits of its application. It is political and contested, especially in the social sciences and humanities. The "key procedures, concepts and criteria in any subject are...problematic within the subject," they are objects of speculation and not objects of mastery, and this is precisely why they are important (Stenhouse, 1997, p. 85). Even in the sciences, "facts" may not be what they seem to be. For example it is not entirely true that the sun rises in the east. The exact direction in which the sun rises depends on the latitude of the place and whether it is in the northern or southern hemisphere, and the exact time of year. Teachers' stance towards knowledge crucially impacts classroom talk.

However, enough has been said on teachers' lack of understanding of the social constructivist nature of learning. The affective and relational dimensions of learning have been largely ignored (Skidmore, 2006, p. 512). The teacher has a crucial role in fostering curiosity and excitement of learning, in helping children manage anxiety, uncertainty and confusion, in encouraging them

to take risks, in creating a sense of solidarity and inclusion where children feel safe, hopeful and free to explore. How does the teacher perceive this aspect of her role?

Does the teacher perceive her job as equipping children to fit into the world, to gain social mobility through education, to become future workers of the nation state? Or does she have a more critical agenda, where her aim is to help children be reflective, inquiring, able to think for themselves, empathize with others, and mobilize themselves and others towards necessary action. Each of these stances would shape classroom talk very differently.

Henry chillingly describes how public school system teaches students to sit in one place for hours, listen to boring lectures, be labelled as winner or losers, compete in meaningless tasks, and learn to suppress their authentic feelings and responses. The hidden lesson is patience to face absurd demands. His claim is that this forms a good training for their future jobs (Henry, 1963, pp. 283-321).

How Teachers can Learn about Dialogic Talk?

Bruner writes "Language not only transmits, it creates or constitutes reality ... The language of education is the language of culture creating, not of knowledge consuming or knowledge acquisition alone" (Bruner, 1986, pp. 132-133). How do we bring about a richer classroom culture and talk that facilitates education in a deep sense?

Teachers, like non-native language learners, learn new cultures and talk by immersing themselves in it. Hence dialogic classroom talk must be modelled for teachers in their own pre-service and in-service education. Authentic questions and more reflexive and critical lines of enquiry need to be incorporated in the teaching. Teachers need to interrogate their own stances and beliefs rather than simply learning new theories and information.

Culture and talk can be consciously reshaped by observation and inquiry of our own classroom practices and talk. According to Bruner (1986), one needs to turn around … "on one's use of language to examine or explicate it, as in the analytic mode of philosophers or linguists who look at expressions as if they were, so to speak, opaque objects to be examined in their own right rather than transparent windows through which we look out upon the world." (p. 125).

Teachers in London and Yorkshire dialogic teaching development projects started videographing their classrooms to study and evaluate their own practice. Some teachers also invited children to analyse their videos as part of their classes. They found that the children developed a metalinguistic awareness, where they could discuss

> … with increasing sophistication and sensitivity the dynamics and mechanisms of interaction: the use of eye contact, listening, taking turns, handling the dominant individual and supporting the reticent one, engaging with what others say rather than merely voicing one's opinions and so on. (Alexander, 2008, p. 107).

This study gives us great hope in the capacities of teachers and children to bring about change.

Conclusions

The dialogic nature of classroom talk, we may speculate, is not simply present or absent, but is found on a continuum depending on the depth and breadth of the teacher's stance, her values and beliefs, and the skills and abilities she is able to deploy. It is also further constrained or enabled by the larger structures of education

and policy and by the social milieu in which the school is located.

1. Different researchers have used different terms for talk that facilitates learning, such as dialogical instruction (Nystrand, 1997), dialogic inquiry (Wells, 1999), dialogical pedagogy (Skidmore, 2000), dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2004) and exploratory talk (Barnes, 2008). There are some differences in these concepts but also significant commonalities.

References

Alexander, R. (2003). *Talk for learning: The first year.* North Yorkshire County Council. Retrieved December 29, 2014, from http://www.lec.ie/media/docs/Talk%20for%20 Learning%20Robin%20Alexander.pdf

Alexander, R. (2008). Culture, dialogue and learning: Notes on an emerging pedagogy. In N. Mercer, & S. Hodgkinson (Eds.), *Exploring talk in school* (pp. 91-113). London: Sage Publication Pvt. Ltd.

Barnes, D. (1969). Language in the secondary classroom. In D. Barnes, J. Britton, & H. Rosen (Eds.), *Language, the learning and the school* (pp. 7-11). Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books.

Barnes, D. (2008). Exploratory talk for learning. In N. Mercer, & S. Hodgkinson (Eds.), *Exploring talk in school* (pp. 1-15). London: Sage Publications.

Bruner, J. (1986). The language of education. In *Actual minds. Possible worlds* (pp. 121-129). Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press.

Cazden, C. B. (2001). *Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Dearden, R. (1968). Forms of understanding. In *The philosophy of primary education.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

GOI. (1993). *Learning without burden: Report of the National Advisory Committee appointed by the Ministry of Human Resource Development.* Retrieved December 29, 2014, from http://www.teindia.nic.in/Files/Reports/CCR/Yash%20Pal_committe_report_lwb.pdf

Goodlad, J. (1984). *A place called school: Prospects for the future.* New York: McGraw Hill.

Henry, J. (1963). Golden rule days: American schoolrooms. In *Culture against man* (pp. 283-321). New York: Random House.

Holt, J. (1964). *How children fail.* New York: Pitman Publishing company.

Keddie, N. (1971). Classroom knowledge. In M. F. Young (Ed.), *Knowledge and control* (pp. 133-160). London: Collier Macmilllan.

Kumar, K. (1988). Origins of India's "Textbook Culture". *Comparative Education Review, 32*(4), 452-464.

Lefstein, A., & Snell, J. (2011). Classroom discourse: the promise and complexity of dialogic practice. In E. Ellis, & E. McCartney (Eds.), *Applied linguistics and primary school teaching* (pp. 165-185). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lortie, D. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study.* London: University of Chicago Press.

Nystrand, M. (1997). *Opening dialogue: understanding the dynamics of language and learning in the English classroom.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Sarangapani, P. (2003). *Constructing school knowledge: An ethnography of learning in an Indian village.* New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Skidmore, D. (2006, December). Pedagogy and dialogue. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 36*(4), 503-514.

Stenhouse, L. (1997). A process model. In *An introduction to curriculum research and development.* (pp. 98-115). Oxford: Heinemann.

Vygotsky, L. (1962). *Thought and language.* Cambridge, MA: MIT.

Rajni Kumar has a B.A. in English Literature, a diploma in counselling, and an M.A. in education from TISS, Mumbai. She was a teacher in The School K.F.I , Chennai for more than a decade. She has also worked in the Teacher Education Wing of Azim Premji Foundation.

rajnidivya@gmail.com